



Five plants to look out for in April



Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*)

The bluebell is a common sight in our woodlands in late spring. It is invisible for much of the year, hiding away as a bulb underground. Grass-like leaves emerge from February onwards, and flowers can start to appear from the end of March.

The recent warm weather has spurred things on, and I have noticed several places this week where they are opening up nicely. Using the bluebell guide on the PN website, **take a closer look next time you come across some bluebells and see if you can work out if they are our native English Bluebell or the Spanish import.**



Greater stitchwort (*Stellaria holostea*)

This plant starts its vigorous vegetative growth in March, with leaves that resemble the herb tarragon. It quickly 'runs up' as the weather warms, and can grow to 60cm tall.



It likes to grow on banks at the foot of hedges, and is a common sight along the local narrow lanes. You will often find it nestling splendidly side-by-side with bluebells.

From April to June it is topped with dainty white flowers, measuring 2-3cm across. These appear to have 10 slender petals, but look more closely and **you will see that there are actually just 5 petals, each perfectly heart-shaped.**



Dogs mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*)

This shiny green plant grows up to 40cm tall, has leaves in opposite pairs and tiny inconspicuous pale green flowers. It likes to grow in shady patches – often beneath hedgerows or on the woodland floor. It is a very common plant, and for me it is one of the great indicators of springtime.

Next time you come across it, try to find the tiny flowers – they are just 4-5mm across. Unlike most plants, this species is 'dioecious' – each plant has only male or female flowers. **See if you can find examples of each, and tell the difference between the two types of flower.**



Cherry (*Prunus avium*) and sloe (*Prunus spinosa*)

Prunus is the Latin plant name for the stone fruits such as cherries, plums, peaches and apricots. Plants in this family are among the first trees and shrubs to open their flowers in the springtime, and the cherries and sloes are in flower now.

This picture, taken along Hangings Lane, shows cherries in full flower - with the other tree species around them still largely dormant. They are very easy to spot in local woodlands at this time of year.

Cherries are common around Prestwood, which was once famous for its cherry orchards. Over the years the birds have done a good job of dispersing cherry seeds, so that today these trees are widespread throughout our woodlands.



Prunus plants belongs to the Rose family, and most flowers in this family have 5 petals, 5 sepals (the green petal-like structures behind the petals), and lots of stamens. **Take a good look at the cherry and sloe blossom, and you will soon learn to recognise this group of flowers.**



Cherry flowers (left) are elegant and pendulous, hanging on longish stalks. Cherry leaves and flowers come out at about the same time.

Sloe flowers (right) are smaller than cherry flowers and come out before the leaves. They don't swing like the cherry flowers, because they have very short stalks. Watch out for the thorns if you are taking a close look at the flowers!



Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*)

Primroses have an incredibly long flowering time – you can find their cheerful flowers out any time between December and May. They are very common in this area, on the banks and verges, under hedges, and in woodland clearings. It is a very familiar flower – but have you ever taken a moment to stop and look at them in detail?



Primrose flowers fall into 2 main groups, called 'pin' flowers and 'thrum' flowers. In a 'pin' flower (left), you can see the single blob of a pale green stigma at the mouth of the flower. In a 'thrum' flower (right) you will see 5 smaller, yellow blobs - the anthers - at the mouth of the flower. **So, the next time you see a primrose, see if you can identify it as a 'pin' or a 'thrum'.**

